

Hearings Will Bring Atom Policy Debate Into Open

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 15 —

A fundamental debate over the future shape of American nuclear strategy appears headed for a full public airing in hearings before a Congressional joint committee.

The debate, which has been percolating behind the scenes for some time, centers on these basic interrelated issues:

Should the United States continue to maintain a substantial superiority in nuclear warheads over the Soviet Union, or should it seek an arrangement with the Russians that would settle on virtual equality in numbers for the two superpowers?

Should the United States install a large-scale defense against Russian missiles, or should it seek agreement with the Russians limiting both nations' defenses to the point where they could thwart an attack from a third power, such as Communist China, but not from each other?

Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara is eager to negotiate a bilateral agreement for limiting, and then, perhaps reducing, offensive and defensive weapons.

Russians Unenthusiastic

To date, the Russians have been unenthusiastic, but there is reason to believe that they may be willing to start talks on the subject later this year after completing celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Even if the Russians decline to sign any formal agreement, Mr. McNamara may suggest "parallel actions" by the two countries to limit future arms deployments, the parallelism to be monitored regularly by each country's reconnaissance satellites.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, while they would not oppose exploratory talks, would prefer, in the absence of a meaningful settlement, to maintain a strong edge over the Russians in intercontinental ballistic missiles and antimissile missiles.

A thoroughgoing exploration of these differing strategic views is promised in hearings, later this month or early next month of the Atomic Military Applications Subcommittee of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy.

Senator Henry M. Jackson, subcommittee chairman, said in a recent interview that he was troubled about the implication of the shifting balance of power as the Russians close the gap in ICBM's and generally speed up their efforts to deploy strategic weapons while American officials talked increasingly of limiting strategic deployments.

U.S. Penetration Seen

Senator Jackson, Democrat of Washington, said that Administration weapons experts had assured him that American ICBM's would easily be able to penetrate the Soviet missile defense.

"If that's so," he asked "why are the Soviets putting so much of their limited resources into a missile defense?"

He said that he intended to call "a top Cabinet official," presumably Mr. McNamara, members of the Joint Chiefs, scholars on the Soviet Union and Communist China, and top weapons experts.

The hearings, he said, will start in public session and then become private for a fuller discussion of heavily classified matters.

In a speech at Stanford University last week, Senator Jackson posed some questions. "While continuing to discuss

our policy as one of maintaining nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union, are we, in fact, embarked on a different course?" he asked.

"Have top defense officials accepted the hypothesis that nuclear superiority constitutes a provocation to the other side to build up its strength? Is nuclear parity now our goal?"

"I do not know the answers," he said. "I do suggest that if such assumptions are entering into the making of American military policy, they should be ventilated and debated thoroughly, and not quietly substituted for the assumptions on which we have been acting."

"The questions involve what would be a radical change in American policy. I believe it could be the road to catastrophe."

Debate Gains Momentum

The debate is gaining momentum and public attention because of an Administration decision to build a limited \$5-billion Nike X missile defense to guard, not against a Soviet ICBM threat, but against the more modest, projected Chinese missile force.

In announcing that decision in San Francisco recently, Mr. McNamara recognized that "pressures will develop to expand it" into a heavily Soviet-oriented system.

He interpolated into the carefully phrased speech:

"I know of nothing we could do today that would waste more of our resources or add more to our risks."

The Defense Secretary believes that American strategy should be based on deterrence. If the United States has enough missiles to survive a surprise attack and retaliate by killing tens of millions of the enemy, then the enemy will be deterred from striking in the first place.

The Russians can build enough warheads to penetrate a big Nike X system costing

between \$10-billion and \$40-billion and kill tens of millions of Americans, Mr. McNamara says, so there is no point in trying to deploy such a defense.

The Joint Chiefs, in a position expressed to Congress last spring by their chairman, Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, agreed that an expanded Nike X would not provide an air-tight defense.

Worth the Price

But if deterrence should fail and nuclear war start, he said, such a system promises to save "30, 40, or 50 million American lives" and that is worth the price.

On the question of offensive weapons, Mr. McNamara said in his San Francisco speech that both the United States and the Soviet Union had a lot more nuclear weapons than either needed to deter war and that nuclear superiority no longer provided "diplomatic leverage."

The inference of this and other parts of the speech was that the world would be a lot better off if both the nuclear giants not only stopped, but reversed, the arms race and limited themselves to only enough to deter the other from attacking.

The possibility of the United States moving on its own to limit further its nuclear deployments, in hopes that the Russians would act similarly, was addressed last week by Paul C. Warnke, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs.

Parity Permitted

Speaking in Detroit, he said: "We will continue to hope that by parallel actions, or by formal agreement, the two countries can undertake to limit their strategic offensive and defensive forces."

Because the Soviet Union can hardly be expected to freeze its strategic force while the United States enjoyed a

large lead, this suggests allowing the Russians to draw closer to a position of equality or parity before mutual self-limitation begins.

General Wheeler placed the Joint Chiefs in opposition to this notion of parity in his Congressional testimony.

The Russian build-up, he said, may well be aimed at achieving a strategic edge that will permit them to deter a big war while using their nuclear advantage as an umbrella protecting local aggressions of a smaller nature.

"At the time of [the Cuban missile confrontation in the fall of 1962]," he said, "the strategic nuclear balance was such that the Soviets did not have an exploitable capability because of our vastly superior nuclear strength."

The Joint Chiefs, he said, want to "continue the Cuba power environment in the world."